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Amanda Charles

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Sexual Assault and Its Impacts in Young Adult Literature

Amanda Charles

As a bright-eyed high school freshman, young for my class at only 13 years old, I was invited to read *Speak* as part of my English course curriculum. Within its binding I encountered the story of a girl my age named Melinda who was scared into silence after being raped at her first high school party. I was deeply moved by Melinda's pain and her struggle to continue moving forward with her life. Although I had not shared in Melinda's tragedy, I felt connected to her. Having been sexually abused at the tender age of 10, I had found solace in silence, just as Melinda did. My 9th grade mind tore through the pages, and I felt bound to Melinda in some kind of literary sanctuary. It was the first time I remember thinking, someone else has felt this way. I had never vocally acknowledged my experience with sexual assault and still did not feel ready to do so at the time, but Melinda offered me a companion in acceptance and healing. Reading her story helped me begin to understand what had happened to me.

As I went through high school, I read books like *The Lovely Bones* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and within each novel I bonded with characters who had shared in an agony similar to mine. It seemed as though there were always more books about sexual abuse to read; an endless supply of horrible, heart-wrenching stories. But they were real stories, stories based in a terrible

yet common aspect of life. I began to wonder why exactly these books had been written and whether there were actually as many as I thought. Goodreads lists 262 young adult novels that discuss rape, molestation, or sexual abuse, and that is with just one click. The dominance of sexual abuse in young adult literature explained why I had come in contact with so much explicit content with little to no effort. However, as I began to come to terms with what had happened to me, I started to seek out these books. As my mental library has filled with more and more narratives of sexual abuse, I have found myself asking the question, Are these accounts of sexual abuse in young adult literature harmful or helpful to its readers? It is my belief that by allowing young adults to interact with these kinds of texts, we open a space in the literary realm for them to empathize, heal, and broaden their perspectives on the subject of sexual abuse. When discussed correctly in a classroom or read appropriately outside of school, rape novels become a source of strength to victims. They portray the message, "You are not alone."

Stephen Chbosky has proved through his own YA literary success that young adult novels can and should guide readers through dark topics like sexual abuse. Having been sincerely touched by the reveal of child molestation by Chbosky in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, I began my investigation with him. Why did he write this book, and was he thinking about people like me while writing it? In an interview with NBC Connecticut, he explains, "I wrote this book as a blueprint for healing. I wrote this book to end the silence" (Vo, 2015). In the novel, the main character Charlie suffers from severe anxiety, depression, and social disconnect. It isn't until the end of the novel that the reader learns that Charlie was molested by his aunt at a very young age and that this is likely the cause of his mental illness and instability. Chbosky further elaborates on the subject by stating that his book "creates dialogue about issues that young people face" (Vo, 2015). It was true; Chbosky had written his book for me. It was intended to give readers like me a safe place to explore and understand trauma.

However, the controversy surrounding *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* exposes the delicacy with which adults are expected to handle the topic of sexual assault while dealing with adolescents. Ultimately, the debate is immersed in how YA rape novels function in the classroom. When approached with this concern, Chbosky says, "the classroom legitimizes these issues and by taking it out of the classroom we demote these things to 'dirty little secrets' and they're not dirty little secrets; these are things young people face every

day" (Vo, 2015). This raises another question: are the benefits of YA novels that discuss sexual assault dependent on the setting in which they are read? According to Chbosky, the best place to read sensitive texts like this is in the classroom, but there are teenagers all over the world that benefit from these novels in their recreational reading.

Although I read several young adult novels about sexual assault on my own in high school, the critical conversation supports the notion that there are more benefits to discussing these novels in an academic setting. In an article titled "Critical Representation of Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature," Erika Cleveland and Sybil Durand report, "Most recently, researcher Victor Malo-Juvera conducted a survey of students who also read *Speak* in their eighth grade English classes. The study revealed that reading and discussing the novel effectively decreased students' acceptance of rape myths" (2014). Several academics were proposing the idea that YA literature about sexual assault can and should be utilized in the classroom to dismantle rape culture. For readers like me, who did not have much interaction with texts about sexual abuse in the classroom, the concept of dispelling rape myths within an academic setting is exciting! By opening up a complex text to students, they not only offer a connection to individuals coping with trauma but also create opportunities for other students to understand the effects of sexual abuse. Classroom exposure ensures that students have the opportunity to explore these controversial topics and increases the likelihood that these texts will be approached with an appropriate mindset. Although my experiences reading *Speak* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* were very positive, these texts can often be misconstrued in their purpose and portrayal. Young adult novels about sexual abuse need to be read with an attitude that cultivates empathy, healing, or both.

The fragile and daunting subject of sexual abuse invites hesitation among teachers; however, when allowed into the classroom, YA novels about sexual abuse offer students a new, relatable narrative that they can utilize to heal, overcome bias, and stop the perpetuation of rape myths. In the article "'But She Didn't Scream': Teaching About Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature," Colantonio-Yurko, Miller, and Cheveallier cite the experience of three high school English teachers who experimented with YA rape novels in the classroom. While teaching *Speak* in her class, one of the teachers "found that her middle school female student participants often blamed the victim and noted that a student believed, 'Sexual violence is the result of individual

girls making poor decisions, such as flirting or drinking at a party” (2017). The hurtful stigma surrounding rape victims, as shown in the previous quote, plays an important role in proving the validity of teaching novels like *Speak*. Researcher Malo-Juvera “found that teaching the young adult novel *Speak* was effective when combating pernicious rape myths” like the one quoted above (Colantonio-Yurko et al.). In an effort to combat the abundance of rape myths among teenagers, novels like *Inexcusable* pull apart subjects like date rape and its legitimacy. The novel *Target* tackles the myth that only women are raped by telling the story of an adolescent male rape victim. Through these novels and others like them, students and administrators are given a plethora of literature designed to give voice to every kind of survivor.

An open approach to these novels can stir productive and perspective-shifting reactions from the students reading. A New York Times article discussing the #MeToo movement explains, “As the country continues to respond to the #MeToo movement, teachers and librarians are turning to fiction to help teenagers understand emotional trauma and make sense of this cultural reckoning” (Jacobs, 2018). They continue with, “Novels can provide a safe place to explore ideas about consent and *speaking* out after abuse because young readers can inhabit the experience of a fictional character rather than face their own trauma head-on.” My own experience proves this claim correct, as living through Melinda’s healing allowed me to approach my past in a less threatening way. By placing these novels in the classroom, we offer more students the opportunity to move toward healing and empathy. This is arguably the largest benefit of YA literature about sexual abuse.

However, as stated in an article by Cleveland and Durand, “It is thus imperative that educators evaluate YA texts in terms of their accuracy and implicit messages on such issues.” Several articles discussing young adult novels that were written in response to the Columbine shooting convey the importance of realistic depictions in YA literature. Each piece of fiction explored the topic of school shootings and struggled with the difficult task of offering an accurate portrayal of a high school shooter. Picoult, the author of *Nineteen Minutes*, did extensive research on the Columbine shooting and interviewed dozens of students in order to craft a realistic representation of the event. The same principle and detail can also be applied to writing about sexual assault. The intention behind Picoult’s extensive research was to avoid any myths or stereotypes surrounding the shooting, to offer

something raw and authentic. This should be the goal of any author writing about sexual violence. If rape is used as a plot line, to add dramatic effect, or slander a character, then the novel itself is perpetuating rape culture in its poor portrayal. It is the responsibility of all authors engaging the subject of sexual abuse to portray it honestly, and it is the responsibility of all teachers discussing this topic to use it as a platform for understanding.

The dangers in writing about sexual assault, where it becomes more harmful than helpful, are realized when rape or sexual abuse is used for titillation or dramatic effect in a novel. In a particularly controversial article titled “Who Gets to Write About Sexual Abuse, and What Do We Let Them Say?” Erin Spampinato explores what society seems to be able to handle when discussing sexual assault and what it cannot. The overarching question of her article is, How detailed is too detailed? As she examines the need for intimately detailed memoirs it becomes apparent that the books that were too descriptive for audiences to handle, so realistic that they pained the psyche of the reader, were not young adult books (2017). This offers substantial comfort to those who worry that YA books about sexual abuse could become too graphic and thus harmful. Fortunately, young adult books that tackle the subject of sexual abuse are generally written with milder details and focus on the healing process; books that go into the harsher, more graphic aspects of sexual abuse are most often *Targeted* at an adult audience. Now, the word “milder” is completely subjective. I have read what I consider to be dark material in YA literature, but it has always been for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding. Adult literature however, has next to no limitations in terms of graphic detail. If a young adult wanted a darker text on sexual abuse, they would need to look for it in the adult section. This discovery solidifies my belief that YA novels on sexual abuse are a beneficial resource and defends against the counter claim that the material available to teens is too provocative.

Young adult novels are designed as vehicles for self-discovery and reflection. Courtney Summers, the author of *All The Rage* (a book about a victim who chooses to publicly challenge and accuse her attacker—the town golden boy—to stop him from assaulting other girls) stated in an interview, “Seeing your secrets on a page can be validating and also make them less scary to say out loud to someone else. That’s not the only reason it’s important to write realistic YA books for teens, no matter how close to the truth that they might be for some. They offer a safe space for readers to process and discuss

what is happening in the world around them, whether or not they ever directly experience what they're reading about" (Kuehnert, 2015). As Summers so eloquently explains, although young adults novels about sexual abuse are risky in their context, they are necessary. These novels do more good than harm because of the comfort and discussion they offer.

Laurie Halse Anderson and Stephen Chbosky have both commented on how many young adults email or approach them expressing gratitude for the message in their books—the message that there is healing. Although there are dangers in exploring this kind of young adult literature, when the reader's goal is to find hope and community, these novels become a literary support group for countless survivors. Chris Crutcher explains, "Stories that depict . . . 'an unsavory world view' allow bruised kids to talk about—and therefore better understand—their own situations, and relatively unbruised kids to become more enlightened and therefore, hopefully, more decent" (2018). Crutcher's claim of increased empathy and decency among young adults not only supports the notion that YA novels about sexual abuse are helpful, but it implies the need for more of them. The purpose of these novels is to develop compassion within the heart of the audience and expose the details and aftermath of destructive human behavior, thus supporting the argument that an increase of YA sexual assault novels in the classroom as well as in general print would benefit the development of young adults. Combatting the discomfort of reading about sexual abuse is well worth the effort when the result is an enlightened and uplifted generation of young readers.

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